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ABSTRACT

This publication reports on a conference concerning postsecondary (post-compulsory) education in the United Kingdom in light of current dramatic changes in education and society with particular focus on vocational qualification structures. Individual sections provide summaries of the following topics considered at the conference: (1) the instability of the current post-compulsory system due to rapid growth in full and part-time students; (2) the nature of the education service and the characteristics of students; (3) the strengths of British higher education which include personal attention and high completion rates; (4) curriculum diversity, workforce needs for educated labor, and motives for pursuing further education; (5) delivery of education and effects of the move toward "lifel g learning" in the restructuring of delivery modes; (6) frameworks to guarantee quality and standards in light of changing needs and expanding demand; and (7) financing issues including the costs of educating an individual from childhood through higher education and alternative methods for funding higher education. Also included are a list of participants and information on the foundation which held the conference. (JB)

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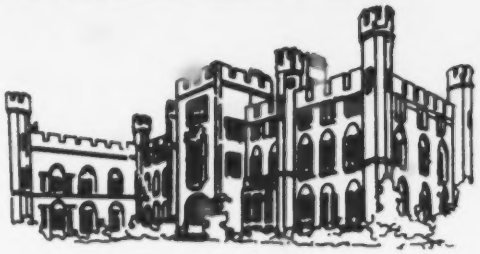

St Catharine's Conference Report No. 41

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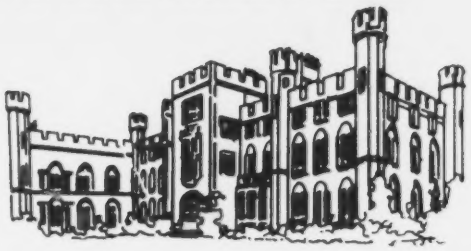

St Catharine's Conference Report No. 41

St Catharine's Conferences are an important part of the work of the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Foundation of St Catharine's, taking up issues of national and sometimes international importance. On this occasion the aim was to develop a long term perspective on post-compulsory education in Britain.

Welcoming people to the conference, **Tim Slack**, Principal of St Catharine's, acknowledged a generous grant from ***The Paul Hamlyn Foundation*** towards the conference costs, and the generosity of ***The Dulverton Trust*** which had made possible the attendance of some student participants.

1 Instability of the Present System

Post-compulsory education, suggested **Auriol Stevens**, had been radically destabilised in recent years, not entirely by intent. The basis of this instability was growth. Full and part-time students in higher education rose by 57% from 1980 to 1992 and participation doubled between 1989 and 1993. Due to relabelling, the number of universities has almost doubled and the number of university students has more than doubled. In further education increases have been less, numbers rising by 25% from 1980 to 1991/92. Participation has gone up by 57% for 16-year olds and 66% for 17-year olds, if schools and full and part-timers are included.

Spending on further and higher education has increased only by about 19% in real terms for the period 1980–1991/92, so that there have been large productivity gains — particularly in higher education where it is generally put at 30% with another 10% budgeted by 1996.

The English have abandoned their long aversion to higher education

Within a decade we have gone from a society in which a bare majority stayed on beyond the compulsory age and one in eight went on to higher education to one in which three-quarters stay on and a third goes to higher education. This suggests that the English have abandoned their long aversion to higher education, a view which finds support in the Mori Poll for the CVCP in 1992. This showed that two-thirds of all families would like their children to go on to higher education and one-third of all adults who had no higher education would still like to have some.

This is an astonishing achievement, whereby the government's target of 1989 for a doubling of participation by the end of the century has been achieved seven years ahead of schedule. The growth was driven by an unexpectedly deep and long

Summary

At a time of widespread change in education at all levels in Britain, reflecting changes in society generally as well as interventionist government policy, this conference report offers an overview of what is happening in the post-compulsory part of the system. It ranges across further and higher education, and the viewpoints of the Department for Education, students, industry, the schools, colleges and universities are presented. Worthy features of the present system needing to be preserved are identified. Particular focus is given to the new structure of vocational qualifications, and measures which have been introduced to ensure that standards are maintained. Greatly increased access, at 16 plus and throughout life, has major resource implications and views were presented of the possible educational and funding strategies which might be adopted to meet this challenge.

recession; funding devices designed to draw a supposedly recalcitrant system into expansion, and the eagerness with which opportunities offered were grasped. It was also aided by the weakness of the trade unions which were unable to obtain financial recompense for productivity gains. Neither expansion, nor the slowdown applied in November 1993, were carefully thought out, either by the government or within the system. Hence the present instability.

The lack of a proper structure of entry qualifications to higher education contributes to this. Two-thirds enter via A-levels; for the rest, preparation is very varied with GNVQs being created to fill gaps. A national framework is badly needed.

Student support similarly lacks coherence. Grants have been steadily cut back but growing numbers and the introduction of non-means tested loans have enormously increased the cost to the taxpayer. Even so, students are having a hard time, many taking part time jobs to make ends meet, so blurring the distinction between full- and part-time students.

For staff, rising student numbers is increasing pressure, whilst the government has been intent on forcing through flexible employment terms. Academic staff are becoming more involved in contract research and consultancies and are moonlighting to supplement salaries, packing teaching into just part of the week. There is a risk of short-changing students and the institution: people who feel that they are paid only half of what they are worth tend only to do half a job.

There is evidence, too, that staff are lowering expectations of students. Lord Russell has suggested in the House of Lords that staff are reluctant to punish students for things which more properly should be laid at the government's door, as to fail a student could permanently damage his or her career while the system does not allow them to start again. It could also damage an academic's career prospects as the government brings in performance related pay and quality assessment.

There is a marked disincentive to increase failure rates in order to maintain standards when completion rates and the percentage of high degree grades are used as definitions of quality in assessment for funding purposes.

In planning expansion it would have been wise to have had an independent accreditation system in place, to maintain the national and international credibility of the system. Instead, each university has its own degree-awarding powers so that standards can slip without anyone really knowing. Nothing has been put in place of the former CNAA, whilst colleges seeking validation of their courses have a choice of universities eager for the fees that it brings.

In planning expansion it would have been wise to have had an independent accreditation system in place

For the institutions, planning has been made impossible by stop-go policies driven by economic rather than educational needs. Some may decide that such interference by the government is intolerable and break for freedom, charging extra fees. This would produce further instability.

Meanwhile there is a growing sector of privately funded education. Beyond the language schools we have business schools and, beyond Buckingham, the beginnings of a private sector in higher education. The ability to pay is the main criterion for entry and there is no quality control. As these colleges recruit overseas on the reputation of British higher education, the income of the mainstream system is threatened.

Underfunding risks the temptation for universities seeking private funding to relax entry standards for the offspring of generous benefactors, to enter into associations with overseas institutions of dubious worth, or to agree to research contracts which give sponsors too much control over intellectual property.

Restricted public funding and the scramble for private funding is creating cut-throat competition between universities. Whilst the talk is of diversity, the pressure is towards conformity, towards climbing another notch up a single league table of universities in order to improve their market position. An institutional pecking order of perceived excellence is emerging in which quality is equated with the institution, rather than the qualification. This is not a system suited to developing the many and varied talents needed by our advanced and complicated society.

Universities which achieve the top of this league will find it difficult to resist top-up fees. If they do introduce such fees, a new group will emerge, smaller than the old universities, along with a larger number of other universities looking remarkably like what we once called polytechnics. From today's broad system will have been created a new binary division giving a boost to the unattractive and dysfunctional English characteristics of snobbery and hierarchy.

A framework is urgently needed within which to develop diversity and improve quality. As there is little chance that the government will provide this framework, who will?

ACRONYMS USED IN THIS REPORT

CNAAS: Council for National Academic Awards
CVCP: Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals
NCVQ: National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NVQ/GNVQ: National/General National Vocational Qualification
TECs:Training and Enterprise Councils

► In discussion, several speakers questioned whether Auriol Stevens had been unduly pessimistic in her analysis. She emphasised that she welcomed many of the changes, in particular the opening up of higher and further education to more people.

On entry qualifications, it was stressed that there was 'no magic in A-levels'. What was needed, however, was a coherent system of credit accumulation to 18. In higher education there was no room for remedial activity if there are strict funding levels and output standards are to be maintained. Others saw the need to recognise the multiplicity of entry tracks into such a highly participatory system.

A major focus of discussion was the suggestion that standards were being lowered in higher education and the meaning of the term 'standard' was queried. Was not some lowering of the average level of achievement acceptable, given the many more people, some rather slower learners, now passing through the system? Another view was that if there was evidence of falling achievement at the bottom end of the range, it was not true of the top end.

Could we solely blame the government for this instability? Did it not also reflect deep seated social pressures becoming evident as the 20th century neared its end and common to all developed countries? There was a suggestion that the changes which had taken place were not radical enough, and an underlining of the need for institutions to take a more proactive rôle. But the pace should not be forced by the top research universities. Where was the leadership of the CVCP in all this?

In a highly participatory system, the division into higher and further education was not always helpful, contributing to the perception of an academic/vocational divide. Society needed a diversity of qualifications, vocational and academic, and this requires a system of 'ladders and bridges' with great flexibility, not instability.

Speakers

Sir Christopher Ball, Director of Learning at the Royal Society of Arts

Dr Clark Brundin, President of Templeton College, Oxford

Patrick Coldstream, Director of the Council for Industry and Higher Education

Roger Dawe, Deputy Secretary at the Department for Education

Lorna Fitzsimons, National President, National Union of Students

Ruth Gee, Chief Executive of the Association for Colleges

Michael Heron, Chairman of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications and Chairman of the Post Office

Jeff Rooker MP, formerly Labour Spokesman on Higher Education

Auriol Stevens, Editor of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*

Leslie Wagner, Principal and Chief Executive, Leeds Metropolitan University

2 What is the Service and Who are the Clients?

Roger Dawe first defined *Further Education* as that which takes place over the age of 16, up to A-level and equivalent vocational qualifications. This is normally carried out in sixth forms and colleges of further education, though also in some colleges of higher education. *Higher education* is education above A-level to diploma or degree standard, and normally carried out in universities and higher education colleges, but also in some colleges of further education. In both cases there is no upper age limit.

In discussion of education at this level, the temptation to focus on higher education needs to be avoided. Both sectors cater for adults as well as young people, and adult education is likely to become increasingly important. Employers will make increasing demands for flexibility in their workforce and place increasing importance on the ability to learn, to adjust, and to readjust as careers progress. In all of this, higher and further education will be key.

Higher education compares pretty well with our competitors, but that is not true of further education and below

At present, higher education in England compares pretty well with that of our competitors, but that is not true of further education and below. So national *Foundation Targets* have been set for young people (Fig. 1). These targets are challenging, but have been reached in many countries, including Scotland. For adults, *Lifetime Targets* have been proposed as a measure of the kind of progress needed to catch up

FOUNDATION LEARNING		LIFETIME LEARNING	
1	By 1997, 80% of young people to reach NVQ II (or equivalent)	1	By 1996 all employees should take part in training or development activities
2	Training and education to NVQ III (or equivalent) available to all young people who can benefit	2	By 1996, 50% of the workforce aiming for NVQs or units towards them
3	By 2000, 50% of young people to reach NVQ III (or equivalent)	3	By 2000, 50% of the workforce qualified to at least NVQ III (or equivalent)
4	Education and training provision to develop self-reliance, flexibility and breadth	4	By 1996, 50% of medium to larger organisations to be "Investors in People"

FIG 1: NATIONAL TARGETS FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

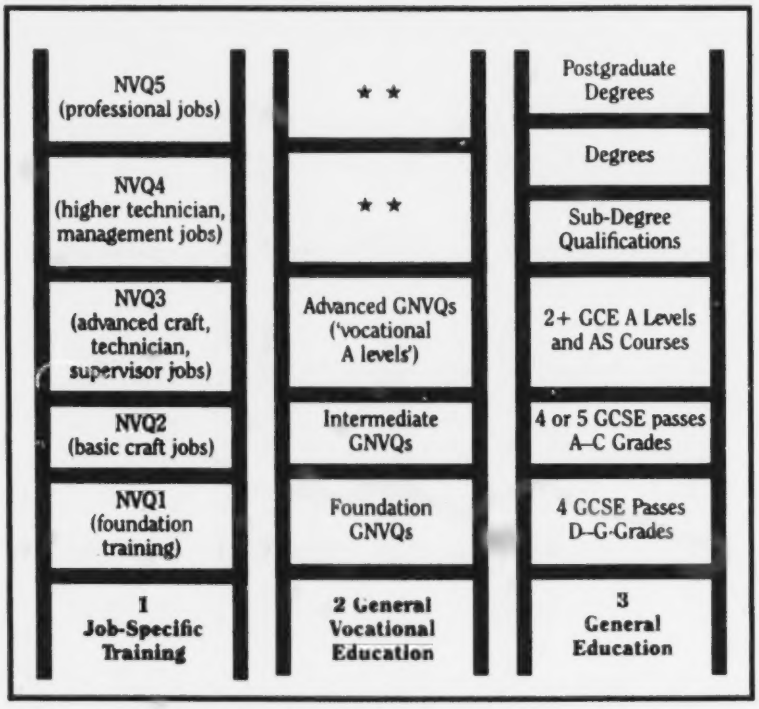

FIG. 2. NATIONAL QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK POST 16

with some of our rivals: but these are targets which will almost certainly need to be raised.

About two million students pass through the ***Further Education sector*** each year, the majority being part-timers, adults and (by a narrow margin) women. The Department for Education is currently trying to put in place a framework of qualifications going through further education and beyond. This is shown in Fig. 2 as three ladders: the General Education route through A-levels to degrees and beyond; at the other extreme Job-Specific Training leading to a national vocational qualification (NVQ); and intermediate to these the General Vocational Education route: GNVQs on to Advanced GNVQs. It is now agreed that Advanced GNVQs will be known as vocational A-levels, and although separate ladders are indicated, it is anticipated that there will be a good deal of movement between them, with students perhaps opting for a mix of A- or AS-levels and vocational A-levels.

GNVQs, five of which were introduced in September 1993, have got off to a good start with more than 80,000 students enrolled. Three more will be introduced in 1994, together with first phase subjects at Foundation Level, and six more in 1995, plus second phase Foundation Level subjects.

Participation in education for 16 year olds, from about 40% in the early 1980s, has now reached over 70%. Growth has been even more rapid for mature students (19 and over), who now make up over 70% of the total in further education. As growth in higher education has been braked, it is in further education that we will see the major expansion in the years ahead.

To support this growth, more public money has been going into further education and the Further Education Funding Council has been created which will give the sector a new focus. New funding arrangements have been introduced and further demands on the public purse are expected to be offset by productivity gains of about 5% per annum.

The Higher Education sector is made up of the universities, old and new, colleges such as the Royal College of Art, and 48 colleges of higher education. The Open University is by far the biggest, although most of its students are part time. In all we have almost 1.5 million students.

Participation in higher education, which in the early 60s was about 5%, and stayed below 15% for much of the 80s, shot up to over 30% during the last five years, a truly revolutionary change. Funding now provides for it to be held at 31% for the next three years.

In detail the figures show, as in further education, an increase in the proportion of mature students. Part-time students have also shown a progressive increase, and there will be scope for further expansion over the next three years.

Total expenditure on higher education, including student awards and loans, which was £3.5 billion in 1987, will be £5.5 billion this year, the largest increase of any sector of government.

Although he had focused on numbers, Roger Dawe recognised that quality was also very important and

had generated a good deal of debate. Consolidating quantity would give the opportunity to focus on quality.

Graduates leaving the system in the future will need to look much wider for jobs, and employers will need to recognise that many who formerly entered employment through apprentice schemes will now enter at the graduate level, a major change of the flow of skills into the labour market.

Rapid changes in the labour market will give increasing demands for further and higher education for adults. As the main mouthpiece of the employers, Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) must play an important rôle in liaising with colleges and universities.

No government could contemplate the expansion of higher education on the scale we have seen in the last few years without considering alternative sources of finance. Students, parents, and employers are the obvious options. This government has decided to switch from student grants to loans.

Further and higher education are the key for the future of this country. We have come a long way with the latter and we are now trying to do the same thing in further education. Roger Dawe was optimistic of success.

- A major concern in discussion was that government was not getting the financing structure right for the kind of reforms it wanted.

If targets set for young people and the workforce were achieved, there was scepticism that funding and institutional places would be available to meet the demand. For higher education student loans would not make savings until the next century and instant savings could only be achieved by charging parents. The case was made for charging employers. Unless this is done they will continue to freeload on the system, and if they are charged they could be brought more effectively into the planning process.

On higher education there was major concern about the way in which efficiency gains had been made by squeezing funding when student numbers were rising. The problem is compounded by current policy which requires capital funding to be raised from within institutions or from the private sector, and the change towards more realistic provision for building maintenance and depreciation. With a real term efficiency gain of 10% projected over the next three years the financial viability of some institutions will be threatened; the impact on the quality of the student experience is already evident.

Roger Dawe thought it depressing that GNVQs were the butt of so much criticism and that most comments in discussion had been negative at a time of such remarkable change and achievement in both the higher and further education sectors.

3 What are the Current Strengths?

Some aspects of British higher education are extremely good, suggested **Clark Brundin**, and in expanding the system we should be aware of the need to retain them.

Pastoral care is one of these strengths. In our institutions students are known as individuals, unlike, for example, some massive American universities where at the end of a four year course a student might be known to no-one well enough to be able to write a reference about him. This suggests that in developing our own system we should aim for more institutions rather than creating excessively large institutions.

Within the European Union, the UK has the highest percentage of people with a first degree qualification. Coupled with somewhat lower entry levels, that means high completion rates.

High completion rates are not necessarily good, because achieving that might mean not admitting people who are at risk of not completing the course. We tend, therefore, to be too selective, a feature which has drawn support from the current obsession with league tables and performance indicators. Diversity has to be recognised. In the case of the two ancient English universities, which have extremely discriminating selection processes, a 90%+ completion rate is probably a realistic target, but for a 'second chance' programme in a local further education college for people who had previously no opportunity for post-16 education, a 30% completion rate may be incredibly good.

We are a failure averse society

Noting some of the weaknesses of the system alongside its strengths, Clark Brundin suggested that we are a failure averse society, tending to equate partial completion with failure. Thus a person will often suppress in his or her cv the fact that they have completed only part of a degree course, although it is most unlikely that they have derived no benefit from the experience. We need to get away from the idea that not finishing is a bad thing, whilst at the same time continuing to encourage everyone to do as well as they can.

Measuring cost by output suggests that higher education in Britain is cost effective: there are few people in the system who end up with nothing; by age group we produce the largest percentage with degrees; and they are the least expensive degrees. Looked at from the viewpoint of input costs, cost per student may seem high, as compared with Italy, for example. However, when you adjust for the fact that in Italy only about 30% of those who enter actually complete, the

issue looks very different. We can reasonably conclude that we have a high quality, caring and cost-effective system.

Changes currently under way are producing pressures for conformity

In respect of quality control, the United Kingdom's record is also extremely good. The external examiner system, whilst not perfect, works pretty well and encourages cross-fertilisation between institutions. Nevertheless, we have to be aware that different institutions with different missions should be judged in different ways and one of the problems with the changes currently under way is that they are producing pressures for conformity. Everybody is judged against the same set of performance criteria instead of recognising that there are huge differences between institutions.

Concluding, Clark Brundin pointed out that in the context of the present cost-effective system we should recognise what he termed 'economies of non-scale' in the sense that beyond a certain size institutions become less efficient, less effective, and more expensive to run.

Ruth Gee focused on the college sector, referring to the report by Smithers and Robinson[1] which provides a useful summary of its characteristics. One of the most interesting statistics in that report is that the number of post-16 students studying in colleges throughout the UK exceed those in schools and universities combined.

There are four current strengths, some of which also apply to the schools and universities:—

- Inclusiveness. It is unusual for anyone who wants to go to college (or stay at school, post-16) to be denied the opportunity to do so. The colleges are also highly accessible because many, for historical reasons, occupy a variety of sites, embedded within the local community.
- Diversity. The 465 colleges of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland include sixth form colleges, general further education colleges, tertiary colleges and specialist colleges. In size they range from a specialist college with just 150 students to a college in Sheffield with over 40,000 students. The average college budget in 1991–92 was £7.7 million. The range of provision is also broad, ranging across all three of the 'ladders' featured in Roger Dawe's presentation. About half of A-level work is college-based. Part of this diversity is a reflection of local need, there being an almost symbiotic relationship between local needs and local education provision.
- Responsiveness. Colleges have displayed a remarkable ability to respond to changes in the legal frameworks within which they operate whilst continuing to meet targets for expansion.
- Accountability. Unlike the universities, as a prerequisite for future funding colleges are required to submit their charters to the Funding Council by the end of the summer of 1994. Embedded within those charters is a legal framework for student entitlement. Of similar importance is accountability to the local community expressed through the governing body, and the relationship with employers, sometimes formalised through TECs. The Department for Education, the Scottish Office, and the Welsh Office all in their way make the colleges accountable, most recently through the provision of league tables. Ruth Gee thought that in principle league tables were acceptable, but she strongly objected to the way in which the idea was implemented, whereby like was not being compared with like. Finally there were the Funding Councils, which had the capacity to contribute to long term accountability. Instead, however, they were often pressurising colleges to make short term decisions, turning an intrinsic strength into a weakness.

Funding Councils have the capacity to contribute to long term accountability. Instead they are turning an intrinsic strength into a weakness.

Ruth Gee finally paid tribute to the quality of the teaching in the colleges. Too often it is assumed that you do not have to be trained as a teacher to teach in a further education college and that therefore the quality of teaching is not good. In fact, the majority of staff in these colleges are trained practitioners and, as a principal, she had been struck by the dynamism and the quality of teaching which was evident.

▸ Contributors to the discussion which followed sought to emphasise that most of the strengths identified by the speakers were historic and would not necessarily continue as a feature of the present system.

'League tables' and the competitiveness they engendered were further criticised. They encouraged standardisation and the move away from diversity, a current strength of the college sector. They would perhaps allow people to fail who might have succeeded.

For the universities league tables would help to entrench the supremacy of an elite group of top institutions. For the others, adding the pressures of league

1. Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson. *Changing Colleges: Further Education in the Market Place*. London, The Council for Industry and Higher Education [1993].

tables to funding constraints and pressure from student numbers could affect standards, and the international recognition of some British degrees might be threatened.

It was pointed out that it was the press, not the funding councils, which was responsible for presenting data in league table form. How might the information be better presented? Any manipulation of the data, e.g., by correlating with socio-economic indices, carried dangers. The basic problem with league tables was that some institution had to come out at the bottom and opprobrium was heaped on it. Was it not adequate to know simply that basic standards had been attained? After all, no-one ranked Nobel prize winners to see who had just crept into the list!

By analogy with the commercial world, it was suggested that for the top institutions, the enhancement of their reputation was a form of brand management, and this was threatened by recent policy and funding changes. Driven by market pressures, some were beginning to respond more to the imperatives of the international rather than the national education scene.

4 Diversity in Curriculum

The first speaker in this panel session was **Patrick Coldstream**, who highlighted likely features of the working world of the future and their implications for education.

In the future there will be far less space for the uneducated

First, companies are shedding labour rapidly and it is clear that in the future there will be far less space for the uneducated. The range of educational provision is important, and not just at the higher levels of attainment.

Secondly, employers are beginning to think about their workers in a new way. Their current preoccupation with teams is a reason for this, not simply teams engaged on projects, but teams involved in debate about strategies and tactics. Getting the right decisions requires the collaboration of a variety of different multi-disciplined groups, each combining different skills and talents. For the individuals who make up these teams two key requirements are (1) independence of mind and communication skills, enabling one to explain to others one's own specialist area; and (2) comfort with figures. The workplace is now much more numerical than ever before and it will no longer be acceptable for graduates to smile wryly and say that they had always been such duffers with figures. Nor will it do for the universities to turn out such people.

Thirdly, technical and organisational change is now very rapid; to keep abreast, people have to take seriously the idea of learning to learn and of learning as a continuing process. Seen in this light, the first part of one's higher or further education is a foundation, in which everything could be checked to determine whether it was indeed basic to something else, or could be left until later. Items so deferred we might never need to know because the world would have changed by the time we might expect to make use of them. Thus continuing learning becomes a way of looking at what we teach now, and a fruitful approach for the employer.

Vocational education is important and it needs parity of esteem with more generalist forms. It will never attain this as long as it is seen to narrow people's choices for the future, rather than widen them. It would help if we clarified uncertainties surrounding GNVQs and NVQs.

Employers could also have a more specific input to particular courses. Thus students might be talking to potential employers at the end of their second year to determine the most useful components of their final year programme, in this way making their courses more vocationally-orientated.

Much further and higher education in this country is locally based with TECs (LETs in Scotland) set up by the Department for Education and the Department of Employment between the colleges and the employers. Unfortunately, many are unclear as to their function and how they are governed. TECs will fail if their rôle as an information broker, enabling colleges of further education to talk to their labour market, and local employers to talk to the educators, is not recognised.

In sum, Patrick Coldstream concluded, what employers had to tell us about the shape of the future working world was important for judging the way ahead; that they could make important inputs halfway through courses, locally by TECs, and that perhaps more than ever than in the past education is becoming important in enabling people to grasp opportunities.

Lorna Fitzsimons suggested that there was a need to look at the diversity of curriculum on offer and to question its purpose. Were real choices being offered?

Although the previous speaker had emphasised the link of education and employment, people go into post-16 education for a variety of reasons. For some it is to avoid the dole queue, some because their employers wished them to be there, whilst others simply want further education. Personal experience suggested to her that at post-16 people have a greater diversity of motive and are often set upon particular tracks without realising what else is on offer.

At the higher education level, rising student debt levels combined with increasing graduate unemployment (particularly for those with arts, humanities and

social science degrees) mean that there is a strong case for re-evaluating objectives. It would not be difficult to add to degree programmes transferable skills and practical applications to give graduates greater value in the employment market. The NUS has long argued that a division between purely academic and purely vocational courses is unrealistic, both being weak on their own. Obviously some will choose purely academic, or purely vocational programmes, but they need to be clear as to why they are doing so. The introduction of the GNVQ was a step in the right direction. It could be a vehicle which nicely marries the academic and the vocational , allowing people to split either way — into the world of work or back into education. It could enable modification of the A-level system, seen by many as the core of the problem.

At the post-16 level the diversity of qualifications on offer might actually be a disadvantage as employers do not value it. Rather, they have a few 'gold standards' to which they pay attention, and very little else. From the students' viewpoint, their choice is determined by the esteem which society places on certain qualifications. From the viewpoint of the user — students, parents and employers — some sort of rationalisation of choice is desirable, and for this purpose the GNVQ might provide the framework.

There is still the belief that whatever you study, as a graduate you will be employable

Diversity in curriculum can be achieved by modularisation, but there has to be coherence of the whole. In general, whether in further education or at university, there is still too little guidance within programmes. Too often people are not aware of the likely value of the end result of their studies. There is still the belief that whatever you study, as a graduate you will be employable.

It can be suggested that we are squandering a wealth of the talent by not showing people how to apply their knowledge. The International Baccalaureate has faced this by introducing a module called 'transferable skills', which enables people to apply their studies and gives them the confidence to stand up and to communicate. Such skills make whole people, team players, who have got something from their education which will help them in the employment market and will enable them to become learners for the rest of their lives. It is this added value which is enormously important in post-16 education.

Denys Robinson first reported what six pupils at his school in rural Oxfordshire said that they wanted out of the system.

Kate[1], who plans to become an engineer, wants assurance that the new GNVQs will be of a standard that will allow her to work in other European countries. For those qualifications she will need to attend college in Witney, but from her village there is no bus service, whilst the LEA proposes to cut travel grants for those of 16 and over. *Matthew*, doing English, French and German A-levels, and planning to become an international lawyer, is worried that he will not have adequate functional skills in maths and science, subjects he gave up after GCSE. *Sarah*, who is physically handicapped and partially sighted, wants to become a teacher but is worried about access problems and whether, taking longer in her studies than others, she will be able to meet the demands of the timetable. *Gavin*, planning to study maths at Cambridge, regrets the lack of a course on current affairs and social issues which would have widened his political awareness. *Joe*, a low achiever, wants a fresh start. He has many abilities outside the academic field and has not managed to respond to the courses available to him at school. Finally, *Emily* wants to go into management but at sixth-form level feels the need for education in inter-personal skills, and finds that her three A-level course is too narrow.

This was perhaps an unrepresentative sample, but illustrative of the issues that the Liberal Democrats' Education Association was attempting to face in their document *Excellence for All*[2]. Detailed proposals are:—

- A-levels should go: even high-fliers like Gavin and Matthew recognise that they are too narrowly focused. Instead a sort of English Baccalaureate is proposed, perhaps with three major subjects and three subsidiaries, one of the latter involving personal and social development, life skills, and a period of work placement;
- Modular courses of this sort should start at 14 rather than 16 (and we should abandon the idea that anyone left education at 16). Work placement should feature even at this level, and there should be place for those who want to get out into the world of work but then want to come back into education, realising their need to be better qualified. The modular courses should comprise core courses and optional courses, the former including English, maths, a science and a modern foreign language. Whether academic or vocational, all should be accredited on the same scale by a new unified National Qualifications Council.
- There should be genuine choice between sixth forms in schools, sixth form colleges, community colleges, colleges of further education, and education and training in the workplace — and combinations of these. It should be possible for people to attend more than one institution, regardless of the funding issues involved. Access and flexibility are of key importance.

1. The names used are fictional.

2. Published August 1992 by Liberal Democrat Publications Ltd, 8 Fordington Green, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1GB. ISBN 1851 871896; £4.25

- A European dimension, particularly important to Liberal Democrats, should be introduced. Student exchange, of a term or more, with our European partners, should be available.

Finally there was the issue of accountability, greatly threatened by moving colleges from LEA to funding council control, by creating grant maintained schools, and by changes associated with the work of the Boundary Commission and the reorganisation of local government. Where does all that leave local accountability?

An issue which received much attention in discussion was the extent to which higher education should be making specific provision for the development of teamwork, communication, numeracy and language skills. One view was that this was a welcome move away from the conventional model of higher education which sees it as essentially professional training, providing a very large amount of a knowledge base in a coherent area for someone who was going on to practice professionally, to a new model in which key features were core skills and transferable skills. For most a revolution of this sort was not in sight, rather they saw provision for skill development being achieved by a more gradual process. Teamwork and communication skills were already key components of many higher education courses, but there were major funding and curriculum implications to making specific provision at this level for the development of numeracy and foreign language skills. Was not the development of such skills really the responsibility of the schools? Or was their development a continuous process, for which the universities should not be allowed to shirk their responsibility? The need for student choice — with the necessary guidance — was stressed. Too much 'nannying' might hold back brighter and multi-talented students.

For some, GNVQs provided a welcome alternative track for post-16s. But how can one raise public perception of their worth relative to A-levels? We should not too readily abandon A-levels but modularisation, which would facilitate movement between these tracks, was worth considering. Multiple tracks were acceptable as long as you knew which track would take you where, and why.

Had we, once again, fallen into the trap of seeing post-16 education mainly as a preparation for higher education? To focus on what some perceived as an academic/vocational split would raise a good deal of unnecessary enmity.

5 Diversity in Delivery

Most people, suggested **Sir Christopher Ball**, seem to have accepted the idea of 'Lifelong learning for all', but without thinking through its implications. Lifelong means abandoning the concept of a sufficient initial education, a major change to an education system which is built on that principle. Learning means a shift away from teaching, away from the words 'education' and 'training' to the all-embracing word 'learning'. Finally, all means abandoning selectivity and providing for even the slowest and the least motivated. Major challenges will have to be faced:—

- As education is very labour-intensive, lifelong education for all has considerable financial implications.
- The 'second bedroom problem'. Given the costs involved, can we, and should we, continue to provide an essentially residential higher education? If life long learning for all means that at some stage everybody goes to a residential university, then in cost terms the second bedroom problem is very serious indeed.
- The classroom problem. If you assumed that post 16 everyone had an entitlement to four years of full time study, and then two months' study annually for 50 more years, there would be enormous difficulty in meeting this demand.

There are a number of possible responses. One is to increase staff:student ratios (SSRs). In 1984 the polytechnics were operating at an SSR of about 8:1, and today, ten years later, the combined university system has an SSR of 16:1 and rising. This vast increase in productivity, or efficiency, is a remarkable achievement, making better use of a most scarce and expensive resource. How far this process can continue — and its effects on quality have yet to be assessed — is hard to say.

The Royal Society of Arts has put forward ideas on SSRs built on the assumption that if you give people a good start to their learning, they will need less help later on, becoming more autonomous and responsible learners. It has suggested as a rough rule of thumb that an appropriate SSR is double the average age of a class, so that five year olds should be taught in classes of ten, 15 year olds in classes of 30, etc. To achieve this it would be necessary to tilt spending in education towards early learning.

A second response is distance education. Contrast Oxford University, which set up Manchester College for mature students and was unable to relax the rule requiring students to live at college or within six miles of it, with China where they have invented a range of TV and radio universities; a crude but extremely cheap model of distance learning.

A third is the development of 'responsible learning', or 'open learning', in which responsibility rests with the student, studying at home or in the workplace, and relying far less upon traditional teachers' inputs.

Amongst the problems are the hidden assumptions we bring to the debate:—

- that education means a teacher expounding the book. Take away the teacher and the book and for most people you no longer have education. The costs of this system are such that you cannot have lifelong learning for all by that route. That way you can only have partial life learning for some, which is what we have today;
- that commensality — eating together — and a shared social life are an important part of a real education; and
- that learning is "something which you do as a kid, do it as fast as you can, and then get on with the real stuff of life, which is working and having holidays". This is the full-time mode, which only makes sense if you believe a sufficient initial education is possible. It makes no sense in a society attempting to create lifelong learning for all.

The full-time mode makes no sense in a society attempting to create lifelong learning for all

In 1990 Sir Christopher wrote a report entitled *More Means Different*. In it he highlighted what he termed the 'sacred cows' to be slaughtered for higher education to be expanded (see box). Much change had occurred, but how much more needs to be done?

What is needed is a learning society, one in which everyone has a personal learning plan (PLP), and every organisation is a learning organisation. A PLP would be worked out in relation to one's own hopes for the future — as Sir Christopher had himself done. It would be written down and shared with a mentor, not necessarily a professional person, who would encourage and cajole one to take the plan seriously.

In a learning society funding should go to the students, not to the providers of education, allowing students to choose the course and the institution.

Perhaps the most effective way of changing what is happening in education is to change the flow of money, and the best way to do this is to let the students decide. A credit or voucher system seems most likely.

In education the new technologies are 'miracles that are always going to happen' in the sense that for years people have been saying that you will no longer have to stand at a lectern and address people sitting in serried ranks. Yet it still goes on. What has changed is the influence of television in people's lives and three examples were given of the importance of television today:

- As a result of its serialisation on television, *Middlemarch* was currently second on the best seller lists. Agreeing with Leavis that this is probably the greatest novel ever written, Sir Christopher said that "the thought that it might be read by so many of the citizens who share my society is truly thrilling". What an educational achievement!
- One of the four functions of higher education set out in the Robbins Report of 1963 was "to develop a common culture and common standards of citizenship". In this the universities have failed; it is television and the soap opera which are giving us what we have of a common culture and common standards of citizenship.
- As part of his own PLP, Sir Christopher was learning to cook, aided by Delia Smith on the television and her book on his kitchen shelf: open learning in every sense of that term.

Universities might close if there were a real free market in higher education

Learning has to be based somewhere. Traditionally college-based, it could be home-based or work-based. Universities might close — indeed, they would already have done so if there were a real free market in higher education, as the Open University does as good a job as the others, but at vastly lower unit cost. Some might be kept open for remedial classes. Mature learners need what might be called 'the supermarket model of higher education', a place to which they can go for their learning needs which offers diversity and which allows them to put together the mixed bag of courses which many want.

We are, Sir Christopher concluded, living through an extraordinarily interesting and exciting time in the history of education; a new renaissance. In the 15th and 16th centuries books which had been central texts were put to one side and have never been read since. Unless we face the challenge of the new

THE PAST WAS:	THE FUTURE IS:
■ A staff:student ratio of 12:1.	■ A ratio of 15:1+, with new learning technologies.
■ Research and teaching inseparable.	■ The concentration of fundamental research and the dispersal of teaching.
■ The domination of the three year full time honours degree.	■ More two year degrees, perhaps calling them associate degrees. Increased part-time study.
■ A three term year.	■ A four term year.
■ Mandatory grants for all full-time students.	■ To target public funding to those in greatest need, including part-time students.
■ The residential model of higher education.	■ An increased proportion studying from home and no public subsidy, for those studying away from home, except in special cases.

renaissance, today's university may go the same way as the scholastic medieval universities. We have spent too much time constructing elaborate knowledge bases, only some of which, and only parts of those, are important to us at the end of the 20th century. Learning involves, besides knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values. Learning must be re-balanced, but not completely, away from knowledge, to give weight to these other items.

Is this a renaissance or a reformation? One of the key questions of the latter was whether lay people could have access to the Deity without an intervening priest. As religion faded in society it was replaced by other things, one of which was education. We are now asking whether learning is possible without the priestly presence of the teacher. Sir Christopher's message to his fellow priesthood was "Watch it: your days are numbered!"

▶ Responding in discussion, Sir Christopher assured his audience that he was entirely serious in his proposals, whilst conceding that exaggeration was his pedagogic style. Although the two systems — the traditional system of education and the new technologically-based lifelong learning — might co-exist initially, rather in the way that the railways survive whilst the motorways develop, he saw the general learning society ultimately replacing the elite educated society which we have been attempting to create since the 19th century.

Many of Sir Christopher's ideas were challenged. As we already had a learning society, even if not formally recognised, were his proposals not patronising? In assuming a comfortable home environment for study, was not a middle class view being projected? How valid was the second bedroom argument when already so many left home post-16? 'Expounding the book' was today just one of a diversity of teaching approaches, so that a caricature of higher education had been presented. As a means of instruction, television was far less effective than books, even radio, in putting over concepts.

Far from being patronising, Sir Christopher said his aim was to provide, in the PLP, some direction for today's post-16 learning which is often informal, eclectic and unorganised. Learning has to be given a sense of form, shape and purpose, related to our life's objectives. Where qualifications were sought they had to be backed by external testing to ensure competence.

His audience quite clearly preferred having him talking to them at Cumberland Lodge that evening to having a home-based technological interaction!

6 A Framework to Guarantee Quality and Standards

The first of two speakers in this session, **Michael Heron** focused on the vocational sector.

The concept of three pathways to a lifetime of learning was at the heart of current education policy change, and the quality of the framework would be judged by its integration and by the ease with which people could move across pathways. With only the academic pathway truly established, this judgement cannot yet be made. Movement between pathways will not occur unless the quality of the qualifications is maintained.

The NVQ System and the concept of vocational education within it have been designed to upskill the country, both for the workplace and for lifetime experience. Developed in association with industry, business and, in some cases, the professions, the aim is to produce qualifications which are not as narrowly bounded as apprenticeships used to be, and are readily transferable. The qualification, indicating what you can do, has its base in what you know.

Some questions are often asked of NVQs:—

- *Are the standards demanding enough, is their knowledge base adequate, and are they worthwhile?* Most are, on all counts, but some are not, particularly the early ones, and the issue is being addressed.
- *Is the quality of assessment uniform and rigorous throughout the country?* Probably not; this is because practice and skill are being evaluated. Unlike academic assessment, this has to be done on the spot, the quality of the assessors has to be rigorously monitored, and it is costly. It has to be done if the value of the NVQ is not to be debased.
- *Are NVQs open to all employees?* In theory, about 80% of employers are involved, but in fact what is currently available is not necessarily applicable and many companies have not entrenched them in policy or incorporated them in training infrastructure.
- *Are NVQs too narrow or too broad?* Opinion is split. Employers often want to train narrowly whereas employees want a qualification with a wider currency. The NCVQ favours broadening, but is developing a consensus with industry, and a common sense base will develop over time.
- *Is the scheme too costly?* Probably not if alternatives are considered and benefits are weighed up.
- *Is the system too bureaucratic?* Most definitely yes. Much needs to be done to make the system jargon free and more user-friendly.

All these problems might be expected in a newly developing system and Michael Heron's first impressions at NCVQ were that it was a hardworking, professional, conscientious and cost-effective organisation. They were doing a difficult job, caught between a variety of interest groups, including business and industry, awarding bodies, training providers, and the Departments of Employment, Education and Trade and Industry.

However, he thought that there had been, in the early stages, a necessary concentration on supply as opposed to demand, and the pressing need now was to take note of what employers and the public feel about the product, and to market it. It has to be recognised that NVQs are still in their early stages and a lot of work still has to be done.

The pressing need now is to take note of what employers and the public feel about the product, and to market it

GNVQs are at an even earlier stage, and their development is concerned with rationally linking a knowledge base and project work. Teachers have to be trained, textbooks produced and grading systems devised. The time has been short but we must ensure

- that GNVQs are challenging; and
- that the twin objectives are realised of preparing for the world of work and for entry into higher education. Experience will show whether employers find them satisfactory and higher education accepts them as a legitimate entry level. Moving as we are into a stage when demand for places in higher education greatly exceeds supply, the GNVQ route will not be easy.

The three pathway system is exciting and ambitious, and Michael Heron concluded by pleading for all to work together to make it a success. In particular those who have come through the academic route must put aside prejudice, otherwise this could be a lost opportunity.

Lastly there was funding, which should follow policy (and not vice versa). It doesn't need more money, but it does need careful thought and consultation to structure funding in a way which is relevant to the needs of the system.

In higher education, discussion of quality and standards is difficult, suggested **Leslie Wagner**, both because of the complexity of the issues and because at their heart they involve core issues of status and value, not just in higher education, but in the wider society.

It is necessary first to define quality, and he offered the suggestion that, for a product or service, it delivered "what the recipient can reasonably expect to receive".

Quality is different from standards, which are a measurable level of achievement. Unfortunately here we tend to confuse threshold standards and excellence. Falling standards may not have reached the threshold level; equally, rising standards may not have reached the threshold of acceptability.

Quality and standards can be applied to inputs (entry standards), process (e.g., quality of staff) and output (qualifications, completion rates and employability). Confusion of quality and standards, of threshold and movement up and down the scale, and of inputs, process and outputs obscures debate on these issues.

Inputs: By the measures indicated, the greatly increased student numbers of recent years has probably meant entry standards have fallen. Whilst the number of applications to higher education between 1987 and 1993 remained about the same, the percentage of acceptance has risen from 45% to about 66%. In the latter year most of those who had reached an acceptable threshold standard were probably offered a place. The average A-level points score has gone down, but it is still above the threshold (which for the last 30 years has been two A-levels).

Process: The quality of student experience overall has undoubtedly declined. The reduction in unit cost is reflected in more crowded libraries, fewer books on the shelves, and reduced teacher contact. However, the state of the buildings has probably improved, whilst more attention is also being given to teaching effectiveness, perhaps because of changes brought about by pressure on resources.

Output: There is no evidence that the academic standard of the top group, the Firsts and 2:1s, has declined. Nor — although there have always been a few exceptions — have the professional bodies ceased to accredit degrees. The view of employers is mixed. Much of what Patrick Coldstream was calling for they were asking for ten years ago, and they are getting more of it now, and no evidence has been produced that the quality and standards of outputs are falling.

Leslie Wagner was unconvinced by suggestions of cheating, noting the Oxford and Cambridge MA remained the only degree which could, in this country, be bought. As to 'funny degrees' and 'funny universities', it was Liverpool which had a Chair of Science Fiction, and the problem with the ex-polytechnics was to get them not to be so strait-laced. Criticism came from a disaffected class within academia and should be recognised as such.

How can we guarantee standards? No system is foolproof, so the question is, what level of errors can be tolerated? And what do you do about weaknesses and failures? In even the best regulated industries things go wrong, and in an industry of this size, with over a million students and 80,000 staff, it would be foolish to expect otherwise.

How do you get quality and standards? This, Leslie Wagner profoundly believed, would come about by the professionalism of the staff and their ownership of the quality issue. As a modern vice-chancellor and chief executive he was familiar with the modern management gurus and their talk of quality circles, driving quality, driving decision-making down to get ownership by those closest to the product and customer. This is precisely how higher education *is* organised and we have to ensure that development, innovation and ownership of standards remains with those who teach the students. If it does not, no mechanisms of

guarantee at any higher level will work and all that is good about higher education will be driven out.

The external examiner system, recently subject to a great deal of scrutiny, is another guarantee. Its critics have either to recognise it as fundamentally sound and suggest improvements, or declare it fundamentally flawed and propose an alternative.

These things are not, in themselves, sufficient. There is need also for staff to engage with others throughout the university and in higher education generally, not just to guarantee quality but to improve it; to take account of the needs of professional bodies; and of their accountability to stakeholders — students, funders and employers.

The key questions in all of this are: What is being guaranteed, to whom, for what purpose, and how can it be done? Each stakeholder may have a different answer and it is not possible to devise a system that answers all these questions for all stakeholders.

The key questions in all of this are: What is being guaranteed, to whom, for what purpose, and how can it be done?

The 1992 Education Act provides for audit by the Higher Education Quality Council to ensure that each institution has a system of quality assurance, whilst recognising that ownership of these issues lies with the institutions and their staff. Assessment of teaching is carried out by the separate Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales. It is a system which (a) responds to the funders and there is little in it for students or employers; (b) has a narrow focus on particular aspects of quality; and (c) in which there is confusion of purpose: is it threshold or gradings, is it accountability, or is it funding? There are grave difficulties in linking assessment to funding, and the exercise probably costs more than the amount of money it moves about. Claims that it has encouraged improvement and provided information for students have been somewhat impressionistic, with little evidence. There has been criticism of the methodology, of the competence of assessors, of the criteria used, of the workload, and of the cost, although these, thought Leslie Wagner, were teething difficulties rather than fundamental questions.

What more do we need? Certainly students need more; they want a guarantee of what they will be getting from a particular course in a particular university. Employers need better information, although they have yet to articulate it: perhaps profiling, or more on competences. Funders need to be assured that the needs of students and employers are being met, and that their funds are being used appropriately and accountably. This can be provided by the quality assurance audit mechanism and by assessment which focuses on thresholds. Leslie Wagner could see no purpose in grading above the threshold, "other than the vicarious pleasure of league tables". A system could be devised which is less cumbersome, intrusive and costly than the present one.

The key question is, does diversity of admissions mean diversity of standards? If you say no, what standard is to be applied across all degree courses? Is it about competences and skills, or the level of subject knowledge?

The temptation in all of these matters is to centralise, to have courses designed by small central groups of academics with a common examination. In this there is a danger of intellectual fascism, of not allowing for the different viewpoints and perspectives inherently possible when institutions design and take responsibility for their own courses. We are more likely to get the best out of the system by defining and refining what we want from quality assurance.

▶ One comment was that the systems of quality assurance described were so different in principle and methodology that it was amazing that they came from one country!

On NVQs, the main focus of discussion was the difficulty of assessment, given the range of businesses involved — from major sophisticated companies to very small enterprises. Was there scope for an NVQ in Assessment? It was essential to get it right. On GNVQs discussion centred on Sir Ron Dearing's idea that they be made available in the schools for pupils of 14 plus, which would provide a continuum and assist movement across pathways.

If assessment is to inform the funding process, should it be rewarding success or preventing failure?

Most controversy was generated around the rôle of the funding councils. Their assessment, it was suggested, was not about standards — that was the rôle of external examiners — but primarily to inform student choice and ensure that institutions delivered what they promised. For most, however, the concern was the link between assessment and funding. If assessment was to inform the funding process, should it be rewarding success or preventing failure? There was a strong argument for additional resources for failing institutions.

Was it necessary for the funding councils to be involved in assessment? The Higher Education Quality Council could do it, or alternatively it might be a body similar to the former CNAA, with a brief to look at systems and thresholds. On the basis of subject reviews across a number of institutions, benchmarks could be established which would aid in establishing weaknesses and advice could be provided on course development and innovation.

7 How is all this to be Financed?

As a legislator, whether in opposition or in government, **Jeff Rooker** was interested in value for money, social justice and equity. Harsh things also had to be said about the public funding of higher education.

Until he became Opposition Spokesman on higher education in 1992, his contact with it, since completing an MA at Warwick in 1972, had been limited to issues brought to him by constituents. He was horrified to discover what had happened in the previous decade. He no longer held that post, he suggested, because many colleagues still thought of higher education in terms of what it was like when they were at university — and it isn't like that any longer.

There are a number of general points to be made concerning finance:—

- It is unlikely that this or any other government will sanction increased spending on higher education. As far as the Labour Party is concerned, the priorities for increased funding are pre-school and the 16–19 age group — not higher education. Unfortunately reality is often cloaked by glib phrases, by manifesto promises that cannot be delivered. Reality and honesty is needed.
- Education, like the National Health Service, has to be free at the point of use. This is the only way to protect and widen access.
- Access should be unrestricted, not limited to the target of one in three in higher education which the government has set, attempting to restrict access when numbers begin to creep above it. Access and entitlement to education should be lifelong.
- The notion that higher education is free is nonsense when many are paying for higher and further education.
- Education is an investment, but students should be able to come out of it debt free. Not liability free, as it is reasonable that they should contribute something to society in return.

Jeff Rooker then turned to his paper on higher education, prepared for Labour's education green paper, but withdrawn prior to publication at the time he was sacked from his front bench post. It has since been published in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*[1].

What does higher education cost? The overall figure for England in 1993, including the recurrent grant, the Funding Council capital, tuition fees, maintenance grants, student loans and access funds, was approximately £5.5 billion. By comparison, the 400 further education colleges cost £2.5 billion.

Official figures suggest that the annual cost of nursery and primary school places is about £1,400; secondary

1. 'Opportunity and Achievement. A discussion paper on higher education', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 12 November 1993.

Discussion Groups

Discussion groups were asked first to consider ***What should be preserved?*** and highlighted such things as excellence in teaching and research, individuality and diversity of institution, choice of place of study and qualification, the culture of independence in learning, the personal monitoring of students, partnership with industry, strength of local relationships, the strengths of the former polytechnics, and the quality of distance learning pioneered by the Open University. Interestingly, one group highlighted ***things which should be junked***: overdomination in the system of the full-time student graduating at 21, low investment in staff training, and funding systems which lead to convergence.

Looking to ***the desired system in the year 2005***, features suggested included:—

- Lifelong entitlement to education
- Integration with the workplace
- Provision of specialist education programmes to industry and professions
- Universal availability of further and higher education with the latter more like further education in its inclusiveness
- Coherent modularised programme for higher and further education, with linked entitlement to student support
- New system of student support
- A Funding Council for both higher and further education working through regional councils
- Funding through the student
- Relatively few research institutions (12–15) only teaching beyond the MA
- The development of graduate schools
- An end to the traditional academic year
- A similar academic year for higher and further education
- Semester system (perhaps 2 × 15 weeks plus optional 8–15 week summer semester)
- Expansion of interactive and distance learning systems, and in particular the expansion of home links
- A greater European dimension, including programmes in partnership with other European universities, including technological subjects

schools about £2,200; and a full-time equivalent place in a further education college £2,700–£2,800. For higher education it ranges £6–9,000, the lower figure relating to classroom-based courses, the higher to clinical medical courses. For an Oxbridge student, college fees of £2,000 are added.

This higher education figure is for full-time students, of which there are about 600–700,000, a small part of a total of approximately three million, if part-timers, those in higher education colleges, Open University students, etc. are included, most of whom fund themselves. If we are to promote expansion the cost of this very expensive part of the system has to be looked at.

At the new University of Central England in Jeff Rooker's constituency, over half the students are part-timers, not all of whom are so fully funded by their employers as many assume and who, quite understandably, feel aggrieved Where are the extra resources to come from, if we are to promote access and at the same time end the decline in quality evident in falling staff:student ratios and overcrowded libraries? The Green Paper, which he stressed was to generate discussion not to declare policy, listed three:—

- Increasing taxation or diverting funding from other public sector areas;
- looking to industry and commerce; and
- direct beneficiaries of the system, i.e., graduates.

John Patten has since added parents as a fourth, an option that Jeff Rooker would oppose. If higher education is seen as the country's investment in the future, it is unfair to place the burden on them.

Equity of funding between part-time and full-time students, and the removal of discrimination against distance learning students, has to be considered. Tax relief has been suggested as an option, but this adds complication and builds in more inequity. As with the government's present proposals on student grants and loans, it does not bring more resources into the system. Instead, might not student maintenance form part of the social security budget?

The government thinks that growth in demand for places might be slowed by the declining number of 18-year olds in the population, overlooking the fact that 18 years ago the birth-rate fell for social classes 3,4 and 5, not social classes 1 and 2 which make the major demand on full-time education.

How can extra funding for higher education be achieved? Higher taxes is not a realistic policy for Labour to take to the electorate, nor is a graduate tax, as students consume a variable amount of resources. Top-up fees have been suggested by LSE and as students at Oxford and Cambridge get a net top-up fee of £2,000, it is easy to see why other institutions want the same. Jeff Rooker had proposed using the national insurance system. A 2% increase in contributions, part paid by employers, could produce a substantial separate funding resource for students. This should include not just maintenance but some element of tuition, increasing for students the accountability of their lecturers and institutions. This would increase pressure for the training of teachers in higher education as is the case in other parts of the education system.

We have to be honest and say that it is not going to come from public resources and look for funding elsewhere

No political party will be taken seriously in talk of expansion and protecting standards if they do not face up to the problem of where the additional funding is to come from. We have to be honest and say that it is not going to come from public resources and look for funding elsewhere which does not conflict with proposals to widen access and protect quality. We ask students to act in a grown-up way and students have a right to demand that politicians practice grown-up politics in facing these difficult issues.

Developing the idea that maintenance funding for students might be switched to the Department of Social Services through national insurance contributions, it was suggested that funding might become immediately rather than retrospectively available by marketing loan stock to private industry. Allied to this was the suggestion that bursaries rather than loans might be available to children from families without experience of higher education. It was regretted that in looking at the issue of student funding the student community was so overwhelmingly conservative in its outlook, despite the growing poverty of many of its number. The issue of student loans was political, not academic. Studies had shown that it would be cheaper to give the money away and it was deflecting attention away from more basic issues of education funding.

More basic was the charge that funding issues of this sort were irrelevant because the system was incapable of being expanded to provide the level of access which many wanted. We had fallen into the trap of trying to work out how funding could be expanded to enable more to go through the existing high cost route (three-year full time degrees) whereas we should have been considering alternative and cost effective ways of providing education to much larger numbers. Another view, that the present system was so bad that to build upon it could only make matters worse, led to the same conclusion: that radical rethinking of the whole system was necessary.

Conference Report by Geoffrey Williams

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